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Mysterious Missile Sites Complicate the Arms Race

The Defense department and the Central Intelligence agency are arguing over the meaning of some holes in the ground, like ancients interpreting chicken entrails. The issue is as important as it is confusing, and congressional action on it could either commit billions more to nuclear weaponry or endanger the security of us all.

The holes, 60 of them, are in Soviet missile fields, and they are larger than any other holes our spy satellites have ever spotted. This has led the Defense department to conclude that the Russians are preparing sites for a new generation of nuclear missiles—perhaps one that carries several independently-targeted H-bombs in its nose.

On March 10 Secretary Melvin Laird confirmed that "the Soviet Union is involved in a new — and apparently extensive—ICBM construction program." He said the Pentagon might ask Congress for a supplemental appropriation to counter the threat.

Now the New York Times reports that the CIA has rejected the Laird analysis. CIA experts, says the Times, have concluded the larger holes are for concrete liners meant to "harden" missile sites against enemy strikes—a defensive tactic

the United States has already employed at its Minuteman sites.

Evidence for this is that most of the larger holes have been dug in existing SS11 missile fields. SS11s are relatively small missiles, and arms experts say there is no reason why huge new missiles would be placed among them. Also, the CIA reportedly has pictures of concrete liners which have already arrived at the sites. The liners are not big enough around to accommodate large missile.

It comes down to a question of intention. If the Soviet goal is to acquire a first-strike capability that would render the United States unable to respond to a surprise attack, we have no choice but to keep a jump ahead of their nuclear technology, and the jumps go by billions of dollars.

The confusion is still another reason for the United States to press the Russians hard in the strategic arms negotiations. If the Soviet Union is not plotting for a first-strike advantage, it has little reason to hesitate about limiting offensive weapons. A treaty would spare Russia the vast new spending that would be forced on it if Washington mistakes refurbished silos for new missiles and paces the arms race into another lap.